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ABSTRACT

The introduction of multiculturalism into the literature curriculum at community colleges has been problematic. Some groups view the trend as an advance of ethnocentrism, while others feel that multicultural texts collide with traditional academic study. Even those who agree with the goal of broadening the curriculum to reflect global diversity do not necessarily agree on how to accomplish that. While the debate continues, literature teachers at community colleges are faced with student populations that are diverse, largely non-white, and no longer ingrained in a U.S. or Western European tradition. In planning an introductory literature class that effectively broadens the curriculum, a constructive approach should be used that draws ideas, customs, and historical contributions from different groups together in an organized manner that enhances students' ability to understand other groups and U.S. society. Three effective methods of doing this include using differences to pursue unity, or emphasizing commonalties among different groups; exploring context, or using topics in a concrete historical or social context; and relating the past to the present through an understanding of the multiple cultures that shape each individual and society as a whole. Finally, the goal of multiculturalism in literature courses should be to help students envision a society in which a wide range of individual beliefs and lifestyles can function together. Contains 21 references. (BCY)

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# MULTICULTURALISM: A DESIGN FOR INTRODUCTORY LITERATURE ON THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEVEL

Dr. Madeline Santoro
Union County College
May, 1997

Issues of Education at Community Colleges: Essays by Fellows in the Mid-Career Fellowship Program at Princeton University

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# MULTICULTURALISM: A DESIGN FOR INTRODUCTORY LITERATURE ON THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEVEL

Multiculturalism in the literature curriculum has become problematic on the community college campus. Its arrival has created political and polemical conflicts for many English professors. In some cases, multiculturalism has entered the literature curriculum as a result of vigorous political activity on the part of groups who feel underrepresented, poorly represented, or unjustly represented in literary works. In other cases, it is a part of the struggle of well intentioned educators to use the curriculum to build self-esteem in underrepresented groups. Whatever the impetus, multiculturalism has been virtually an unstopable trend in the community college literature curriculum. Some groups see this trend as an opportunity to advance ethnocentricism; other groups resist these politically correct attitudes feeling that the inclusion of multicultural literature collides with traditional academic literary study. Even among those who believe the literature curriculum must be broadened to reflect global diversity, there is a wide range of opinion about how and what to teach and what not to teach about other cultures (Magner 1996). Increasingly, vocal academics like those in the National Association of Scholars resist a redesign of the curriculum and are reasserting the traditional curriculum which they

maintain is the basis of our society and sufficiently rich and satisfying to obviate the need for additions, never mind deletions from it (NAS, "Is the Curriculum Biased").

As educators, we are not clear about multiculturalism. How does it differ from American culture? We always have had a diversity of voices in the United States; why broaden the literature now? And does this broadening of readings from other cultures destroy our American tradition and water down the concept of literature itself? What do we intend? Do we want students to know a few or a variety of cultures? Do we want to compare and contrast other cultures to what we consider "American" culture. Do we envision learning from other cultures and developing elements of global culture within American culture for the good of humanity? It is only in the last several years that the intensity of these questions has resulted in dramatic changes in the type of literature that community college professors incorporate in their first level literature courses.

Proponents of multiculturalism in literature believe that cultural pluralism should be reflected in the curriculum. Most of these proponents look toward the ideal state of society in which diverse racial and ethnic groups coexist with mutual respect and equal rights even as they pursue their cultural traditions (Platt 1993). Thus, by incorporating various cultures into literature, a multicultural curriculum would seem to achieve the objectives of cultural pluralism. On the other hand,

opponents to a multicultural curriculum feel educators have the mistaken notion that merely including in the curriculum texts of various groups does not help solve the problem of coexistence. George Will charges that this approach may make problems worse rather than better and that, in fact, a backlash seems to be developing among disenchanted whites. Additionally, he feels strongly that the arbitrary mixture of multicultural texts may result in only superficial cosmetic change in the curriculum (Will 1990). Other vocal opponents to curriculum changes feel that not only does incorporating multi-culturalism obliviate the canon but also attributes to an increase in racial tension on campuses and feeds into political agendas of "guilt mongering groups" (NAS, "The Wrong Way").

While the debate continues, teachers of literature on the urban and semi-urban community college campus are faced with a student population that is extremely diverse and largely non-white and no longer ingrained in an American or Western European heritage. Soon Latin Americans will outnumber African Americans, just as now both together outnumber white Europeans in many American cities. This demographic revolution has coincided with and reinforced political pressures for inclusion by other traditionally powerless groups (Wilson 1995). While the case may be somewhat different for the national colleges and universities because they draw on the college age population from throughout the country, community college literature

professors seem to be faced with not whether to include multicultural literature into their courses, but how. This dilemna is especially prevalent in the freshman introductory literature class where the professors are inclined to include their students' cultural heritage into literature selections. Many of these faculty use a variety of ethnic literature not only because of the sensitivity to those students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, but also to affect a sense of global broadening in each student to enable them to meet success in a workworld that is global in nature (Magner 1996). Thus, cultural diversity offers an exciting opportunity to revitalize literature courses, giving them a new sense of purpose and a more inclusive definition of knowledge.

For those faculty who believe strongly in pluralism, the method of approach differs, with no one rational standard against which all diverse ways of thinking can be analyzed. Some faculty are products of a deconstructionist approach in literature. Following the philosophy of Derrida and Lyotard, they argue for the relativity of all literature (Lyotard 1982; Derrida 1992). Because there is no objective truth, they say, a pedagogical attempt to define a fixed canon is arrogant folly. Others feel that a haphazard accummulation of varied literature is no solution and that too often Western and particularly American literature is sacrificed for the incoporation of multiculturalism (Lovin 1992). Others feel it is not enough to give students a

recommended reading list or to simply add on a multicultural module to the "canon" (Howe 1991). Thus, multicultural design in the literature curriculum can be ineffectual or even destructive in achieving the purported goals of faculty. How, then, can or should curriculum design occur to ensure the global broadening college professors wish to instill in their literature classes? A design that goes beyond cosmetics requires rethinking how to capture the dynamic and relational aspects of ethnicity; how to understand the diversity as well as unity within cultural experiences; how to go beyond the binary position of assimilation vs. separatism (Platt, 1993).

In order to successfully accomplish these objectives in a first level introductory literature course, Chester E. Finn, Jr., director of the Educational Excellence Network, recommends a "constructive" multicultural curriculum which would "draw ideas, customs, and historical contributions from all our variegated groups and heritages..." (1990). Drawing these materials together in an organized manner will avoid the wrath of George Will who feels that multiculturalism in literature is fast becoming another rationale for a "curricular junkyard" (Will 1990).

Developing an introductory literature course, therefore, mandates a comprehensive array of literary pieces presented in a design that will enhance the student's ability to know better both the other occupants of the planet as well as American society. To introduce students

to dialogues of culture and meaning within and across societies and to create a growing awareness of the "other" both at home and abroad, this writer recommends three approaches: using differences to pursue unity; exploring context; and dialoguing the contemporary with the past.

USING DIFFERENCES TO PURSUE UNITY

A staple of teaching has been to present alternative interpretations and teach that weighing analytic conflict is part of understanding human affairs. It is now possible to teach about a variety of cultural communities outside the elite orbit; the materials are accessible and available. However, using literature to tell the members of a particular group about themselves, their ancestors, their unique qualities, how superior they are, how oppressed they have been is a destructive form of exploring differences because it can promote separatism (Finn 1990). Instead constructive multiculturalism draws ideas, customs, and contributions of all our variegated groups and heritages into a unified curriculum. Properly done, this produces educational content that is rich and full and evolving, as the heterogeneous society we inhabit. It shows the differences but emphasizes the commonalities-- the ideas, institutions, and norms that we share, whatever the color of our skins or birthplace of our grandparents. Such instruction entails the search for community and an appeal

to commonality, not one that flatters or denegrates particular groups.

To counteract Harold Bloom's charge that straying from the canon can lead college students to a kind of mindless openness (Bloom 1994), faculty members can foster in their students a far more complex range of intellectual and affective responses to diversity, such as respect, empathy, and a disposition to take seriously differing world views as basic intellectual virtues that a pluralistic society must cultivate. To serve these goals, the syllabus would emphasize multiple contributions to Western and world cultures. Assignments would find ways to help students recognize their own values and assumptions in relation to the literature they are studying.

American literature can be an integral part of this approach when presented as inherently full of individual conflict. Spiritual conflict can be seen in such writers as Poe and Melville as well as Faulkner and Hemmingway. Mark Twain, Whitman, Emerson can emerge as writers with new concepts of society whose merits often did not depend solely on the peculiar physical circumstances of American history but also on individual identity (Howe 1994).

The general themes of American literature can be seen in other literature as well, differences between the powerful and the excluded and in the experience of single human beings trying to mediate multiple claims and commitments in complex societies. E. M. Forster in A

PASSAGE TO INDIA, for example, represents India as Europe's other. His India, in fact, really is northern, Muslim, India. South India, Hindu India, appears in this book faintly as an even more inaccessible level of difference and otherness. India can be shown as similar to the United States, as a number of pluralities vying for position, threatening to split apart; Kashmir, Punjab, Dravidian/Aryan, the castes, the tribals beyond even the margins of outcast status. Multiculturalism, thus, can be shown as a recognition and toleration of the infinitely proliferating levels of complexity both in the experiences of others and in one's own culture.

EXPLORING CONTEXT

Using topics and issues in a concrete societal, historical, or cultural context is another approach that can connect pieces of literature together and incorporate American literature as well as the canon. Students can read, learn about, write about, and discuss pieces of texts from different cultures and traditions. The course will recognize that literature is important in its own right and on its own terms but will also place the culture within a coneptual framework which employs an understanding of how cultures work, how they change, and what significance they have. This method works on the principle of teaching students how to read, that is to engage and eventually to critique the internal structure and argument of the text.

In a course designed for exploring context, culture should be seen as a patterned system of meaning: the generative values, visions, rituals, and transactions of a society. It should imply the best that has been thought and done and the developed taste and understanding of those who studied the best (Dyer 1995). The faculty should have a strong commitment to using rich, complex primary works as source material. This is not to say that faculty should teach pieces of literature either as ends in themselves, as arguments among great minds, or as a way of testing independent philosophical and aesthetic standards. Rather faculty should select pieces of literature to explore cultural topics; for example, myths of origin and concepts of virtue or gender within Western society and across world cultures. The text then becomes an exemplar and agent of important ways of seeing the world; students are taught both that they can engage in the text itself and that they can view it as a lens into another way of life. Thus, studying the social and cultural implications of the literature does not neglect the work's internal structure and strategy. The faculty would teach that attention to cultural context illuminates aspects of works that might otherwise be missed. Works would be selected both on the basis of their literary worth as well as their cultural context.

Using this approach, the whole pattern of the American way of life can be shown as transplanted cultures. The resultant American themes of upward mobility, religion,

reform of relations between the sexes, conflict of manners between regions, as well as the problems of slavery and race are treated by writers such as Nathanial Hawthorne, Edith Wharton, Mark Twain, and Alice Walker. The American hero can be seen, therefore, as one creating values quite apart from either tradition or insurgency, deliberately conceived at a distance from any world. American literature, thus, can be seen as "... a response to disaffection in American society ...that sets the hero free to disengage himself from society. Thus the American hero becomes an embattered self finding freedom..."(Bloom 1994).

DIALOGUING THE CONTEMPORARY WITH THE PAST

Creating a multicultural society is a complex problem for community college faculty for the aim of this process is not just creating a multicultural experience but fostering a multicultural education. The solution to this problem too often clusters around two extremes. The first extreme, the politically correct solution, takes a critical view of everyone's past, but especially the Euro-American past. Political correctness rejects most of what has gone on before, both the claims of the dominant culture and the distorted cultures of the oppressed. In this sense, multiculturalism means freeing oneself from the past to allow peoples and cultures to be themselves in a way they have never been before or at least that they have not been in the five centuries since the age of conquest began (Adler

1990). The other extreme feels we can never master all of the world's cultures. Since our Euro-American culture is the most available or is "the best" it has some claim to priority (Banks 1993). However, the real problem, the fundamental problem, is how the past is related to the present (Lovin 1992).

In a pluralistic society like ours, relating the past to the present means understanding the multiple cultures that shape each individual as well as the multicultural diversity of our society as a whole. In introducing students to literature, which after all is a reflection of society, faculty should not only help them discover their Africanness or the persistence of Confucian values but also the features of their identity that have been shaped by middle class white folk. Thus, students' ability to analyze their own culture means in part helping students learn about and learn to address the multiplicities in American society.

Part of the problem in connecting the present with the past in an introductory literature class is that a structure built on a "time" basis begins with the past but never clearly connects to the present. Students study "in order" without ever directly connecting their studies to themes in contemporary American culture and society. Students are left to make connections or applications on their own. Even in the complaint that students are often only given Western literature and have not been introduced to other cultures, quite often any direct consideration of American literature

is neglected (Takaki 1989). At the other end of the spectrum, an introductory literature class can choose to ignore the past, suffering from the provincialism of the contemporary, veering wildly from fashion to fashion, each touted by the moment and then quickly dismissed (Howe 1991). But the past is the substance out of which the present is formed and to let is slip away is to acquiesce in the thinness that characterizes so much of the present criticism of multiculturalism. Losing touch with the heritage of the past results in a mere compedium of momentary complaints (Lovin 1992).

Thus, students in an introductory literature class should read some literature by Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Jane Austen, as well as Kafka, Emily Dickinson, and Leopold Senghor, not just because they support one or another view of social revolution, feminism, or black esteem, and not as dead texts of a dead past, but rather as a critical engagement with living texts from powerful minds still very much active in the present. These writers can be used to illuminate the understanding of the self in modern culture. They can be used to explain the assumptions and values that students take for granted because these assumptions and values are so much a part of their world that they have become invisible (Bercovitch 1986).

Literature should explore relationships. This relationship can be one where a piece of literature from the canon is linked with an actual popular belief and can

be seen to have meaning in several different kinds of contemporary societies. Students can take a fresh comparative look at ideas, values and assumptions that are intrinsic to American society by exploring the functions of past literature in relation to the functions of contemporary literature. Students can start with their direct experience of and differing responses to topical issues such as equality or power, and then reach back in time and/or across Western and world civilization to further illuminate and critically examine their perspective on their own society. Thus, students can be challenged to discover literature not as works that reside outside or above society, but as avenues to explore their own values, ideas, and experiences.

CONCLUSION

Multiculturalism has to be more than just a special project or piecemeal reform in the introductory literature courses in the community college. In the last decade, literature has provoked a great deal of rethinking about class/economics, race/ethnicity and gender/sexuality in our society. If faculty are open to teaching multiculturalism, they need an enormous amount of conceptual resources to design and structure courses like introduction to literature that capture the whole perspective of human history in its literature. A course design must incorporate literature that is designed to explain a clear, shared idea of what it would mean for someone to be a part of a multicultural society. Neither political correctness nor a blind

adherence to a "canon" provide an appropriate method of accomplishing this. The literature chosen must ultimately help students envision a society in which a wide range of individual beliefs and lifestyles can function together in close proximity, enriching one another by their difference. It must, above all, include American works, particularly those that reflect the essence of our culture as one that was established to incorporate differences and to promote individualism.

As we approach the year 2,000, many faculty in academia see globalizing their literature curriculum as a natural and necessary metamorphosis. However, incorporating multicultural literature in an introductory course should not be treated as trendy or anathema to the views of the canonists. Nor should it be designed simply as a tethering device for our sense of who we are, but rather who we, in each moment of time, become.

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